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ETHICAL AND EPISTEMIC DILEMMAS OF BEHAVIORISM AND THE IDENTITY THESIS

by

George J. Stack

In the preceding discussions Professors Shaffer and Firth have raised significant questions concerning the ethical and epistemological implications of some rather popular philosophical interpretations of, or treatments of, the traditional mind-body problem. These questions or dilemmas seem to conspire to undermine either the consistency or credibility of the basic assumptions of both behaviorism and materialism (as expressed in the identity thesis). While I would agree with both Shaffer and Firth that some form of dualism seems to be intimately associated with our conceptions of moral responsibility or with more or less universal moral sentiments or judgments, I would hold that since all of the relevant evidence is not yet in concerning the plausibility of a materialistic account of human behavior, a provisional dualism may be a more cautious position to adopt at this time. This caution is determined not only by the possibility that overwhelming evidence may be attained in futuro concerning the validity of the identity thesis, but also because the general question of the fundamental basis of all human functioning is related to a present stage of scientific (e.g., physiological) development and is, hence, subject to revision in the future.

My basic objection to Jerome Shaffer's arguments concerning the difficulties which a behaviorist or identity theorist would encounter in regard to question of the violations of a moral principle which has a high degree of universality is that it approaches the entire difficulty from a circuitous direction. For, the immorality of an act as vicious as that described by Shaffer is not wholly embodied in the presence or absence of pain behavior. Thus, an individual capable of unusual self-control or stoical endurance might not exhibit pain behavior under the circumstances described and yet we would deem this unjustified infliction of suffering an immoral action because of the intention of the individual inflicting such suffering. If one is seeking to determine the locus, as it were, of the intrinsic wrongness of such actions, one must look to the agent and his intentions, not to physical responses of the victim.

The questions of the responsibility and the intentions of the agent seem more appropriate for making the central issue involved in the general problem more visible and precise. If a person or a self cannot choose or decide what to do on any given occasion, and if we are only concerned with the interaction of two physiological "mechanisms" which are responding to stimuli over which they presumably have no control, the entire question of moral judgment or ethical prescription is irrelevant. The presumption of intentional choice and action is central to the assumption that men can act in accordance with the kind of universal moral principle that Shaffer has formulated. It is at this point that the postulation of some form of dualism seems to be called for in this analysis of the ethical implications of either a strict behaviorism or materialism. Neither the strict
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behaviorist nor the identity theorist can provide an adequate explanation of the initiation of choices or actions and, hence, it is difficult for anyone holding such positions to ascribe responsibility to anyone. Pain behavior or the stimulation of certain parts of the brain have no moral or ethically relevant dimension at all.

The assumption that A can cause undeserved suffering in another is the crucial one (not the question of the physiological effects of some actions) since it presupposes that someone has initiated an intended action. To overemphasize the effects produced by an action is misleading since it is conceivable that similar undesirable effects (e.g., pain behavior or the stimulation of, say, the C-fibers of the brain) could be produced in another by involuntary or unintentional behavior. Thus, for example, an epileptic who had ingested too much alcohol may suddenly begin to attack violently a nearby person and induce pain behavior in another or "cause" those specific brain-states in another which are experienced as pain even though he is the victim of physiological stimuli over which he has no control. Such an individual in Shaffer's account (e.g., in his assumption about how a behaviorist or materialist would deal with the violation of the stated moral principle) could be charged with acting in violation of the principle that no one should ever inflict great pain on another against his will for one's own amusement. For, when we want to determine whether the agent did such and such an action in violation of this principle, we must concern ourselves with an analysis of the intentions or purposes of the agent (as is already implied by Shaffer's statement of the principle) and not with the effects brought about by his behavior. The relevance of a dualistic interpretation of man's being is already implicitly present in the statement of a universal moral principle and the presumption that human beings can deliberately inflict suffering for the sake of something. Both the behaviorist and the identity theorist can accept such a moral principle. The problem is that they would have great difficulty in determining the relationship between the agent's intention or purpose (for the behaviorist this is clearly inaccessible and for the identity theorist it would have to be a physical event which itself had a prior material cause) and his behavior. It seems to me that neither the strict behaviorist nor the materialist can legitimately hold that there is a self-conscious I or person who initiates any type of behavior. Herein lies the paradoxical nature of their interpretation of man's being or nature vis-à-vis ethical prescriptions, moral responsibility, or moral judgments about human action.

Contrary to Jerome Shaffer's views, it seems to me that (a) behaviorism could be true and (b) materialism could be true and (c) the moral principle cited could, in a sense, be true. That is, such a principle could be adopted as a more or less universal claim about what one ought not to do even though behaviorism and-or materialism could be true. The problem is not that behaviorism or materialism logically negates the claims of ethics or of morality, but that the consequences of a strict behaviorism or materialism seem to make ethical principles and judgments irrelevant for an understanding of human behavior. Both of these theories put in jeopardy the validity or the justification of morality in human life. What probably would have to be substituted for a rational or emotive basis of morality would be an arbitrary pragmatic justification of certain types of behavior or responses in terms of the promotion of the convenience of behavioral organisms or physio-chemical
entities. Such entities would be programmed or conditioned to act in certain ways for whatever practical benefits would presumably be derived from acting in these ways. Certainly, there could be no such things as intrinsic good or intrinsic evil. There is nothing in a strict behaviorism or materialism which prohibits moral nihilism — except the presumptive "utility" which some identity theorists seem to believe can be derived from a materialist conception of man.

Most ethical theories require that a morally responsible individual be capable of deliberation, choice, and resoluteness. Moreover, there is the general assumption that each individual has at least a degree of freedom of choice, can willfully choose to do what is right or wrong. These assumptions imply the existence of a conscious, self-reflective individual who has the capacity to initiate choices, decisions, and actions. Clearly, only a dualistic interpretation of man's being (despite its difficulties) is compatible with most conceptions of man as a morally responsible being.

Aside from the provocative question of the ethical implications of various attempts to explicate the mind-body problem, there are a number of epistemic difficulties which are associated with a strict behaviorism and, *a fortiori*, with materialism or the identity-thesis. One of these difficulties seems to be related specifically to the kind of analysis which Roderick Firth offers in his response to Shaffer's paper. That is, the notion that although one firmly believes that one is in pain this belief is corrigible. This scepticism about one's own subjective judgment that one is in pain has always struck me as somewhat odd. For, if it were granted that I could be in doubt that I am now experiencing a sensation of pain, could I not also extend this scepticism to all sensations? If I could be in error in averring that I am in pain (a sensation notorious for its intensity), could I not be in error in all of my perceptual judgments, in all of my claims about immediate sensations? It seems to me that the assertion that the sensation of pain is corrigible tends to undermine any empirical claim whatsoever. Unless one were willing to hold a view similar to Peirce's fallibilism (a view which is not in vogue today, especially amongst those who agree with Norman Malcolm that it is possible to know that something is the case in a strong sense of 'know' which precludes doubt even though what is "known" to be the case is based upon perception of an empirical phenomenon), the warranted certainty of the veracity of some sensations or perceptions (which Roderick Firth alludes to) would be unfounded. Since, according to the identity thesis, every sensation is a brain-state, if one brain-state is corrigible (e.g., the brain-state experienced as pain), then all are. Some defenses of the identity-thesis lead to a radical scepticism concerning the veracity of sensation and perception which reintroduces all of the "problems of the external world" which plagued the various forms of idealism. Moreover, such scepticism ought to be consistently extended to the scientific observations which are the empirical basis upon which the identity-thesis is founded. For, are not the protocol statements of scientific investigators also corrigible brain-states of each observer? To be sure, Firth is quite right in holding that our beliefs about physical objects are based upon "reasons" or "evidence". But our belief that we are perceiving physical objects is itself based upon immediate sensory experiences which we assume to be veridical. If, as Firth remarks, the brain may be an "indeterministic system", then he has attributed to
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the materialist position an implicit scepticism which is even more radical than that which I believe is implicit in the materialist view. For, if the brain were indeterministic in its functioning, then not only coordinated actions, but coordinated observations and judgments would either be unlikely to occur or would be the result of a remarkable coincidence.

There is one final remark I would like to make concerning some epistemic difficulties of the identity thesis. Since all of our “mental states” or “states of consciousness” are presumed to be actual or possible brain-states and-or processes, a serious problem concerning our knowledge of external phenomena seems entailed by the postulation of the identity thesis. For, it would seem that any given brain process that is reported as a sensory experience cannot be shown to be a veridical perception of any actually existing physical object or external phenomenon.

Thus, for example, if an individual is asked on a particular occasion to report what he is perceiving and he says, “A yellow, rectangular sheet of paper,” and if this same individual was subsequently stimulated in a previously determined portion of his brain in such a way that he would again report that he was perceiving a yellow, rectangular sheet of paper, both reports would be perfectly accurate even though, in the latter case, there was, of course, no external phenomenon to be perceived. Of course, we do not need such artificial cases to indicate this difficulty since there is ultimately no way of knowing what the actual properties of physical objects are if all “experiences” of such phenomena are ontologically private brain-states or brain-processes. Intersubjective verification or confirmation cannot help us here since it is not possible for two perceivers (or “physio-chemical mechanisms”) to have or experience the same brain-states. The ostensible “publicly observable physical object” (which J. J. C. Smart mentions in his “Sensations and Brain Processes”) cannot be known to exist if the identity thesis is valid. Ultimately, it seems to me, the identity thesis leads to a paradoxical position which I would describe as material subjectivity. The attempt to obviate this kind of difficulty by arguing, as Wilfrid Sellars has done, that there are “brain state universals” is highly questionable. The very notion of a material universal is surely peculiar since it treats universals as if they could be public phenomena. Perhaps one could argue that certain patterns of brain processes have developed throughout man’s “evolution” which have proved to be more or less successful for the preservation of the species, the acquisition of skills, and the most effective orientation of man towards his nature environment or Umwelt. But this kind of speculation becomes as exotic as Nietzsche’s claim that the “categories of the understanding” have acquired validity in terms of their purely pragmatic value for man’s adaptation to the world in which he finds himself.

The basic value of dualistic conceptions of man is that they enable us to account for the fundamental intentional and purposive basis of action. The behaviorist who refers to hypothetical dispositions to act in this way or that, who attends only to publicly observable phenomena, has difficulty in dealing with the apparent intentionality of an individual, his capacity for choice, selective responses, deliberation, self-reflexive states of consciousness, the motivational nexus of human behavior, and, ironically, the interpretive and purposive activity of the
behavioralistic observer himself. There is, furthermore, the problem of identifying certain states of being which do not elicit any clear-cut behavioral criteria at all (e.g., doubting, believing, imagining, etc.). Usually, it is what is inaccessible to others which is most significant in determining how we act. Our subjectively significant projects or life-goals may conceivably never be revealed to another and yet they often function as the spiritual basis of our existence, the subjectively posited telos which may be our raison d'être. To such spiritual states of being we do, indeed, have privileged access.